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FILM

Sellers is super in a bitter comedy

Peter Sellers portrays a gardener who is thrust into the spotlight

BEING THERE
Place Ville Marie

Produced by Andrew Braunsberg; directed by Hal Ashby; screenplay by Jerzy Kosinski, adapted from his own novel; photography by Caleb Deschanel; with Peter Sellers, Shirley MacLaine, Melvyn Douglas, Jack Warden and Richard Dysart.

By DAVE CHENOWETH
of The Gazette

One of the most important scenes in *Being There*, the bitter and frequently brilliant black comedy which has just opened in Montreal, comes as the final credits are rolling.

With appropriate irony, the scene consists of a series of out-takes — sequences which were never included in the actual movie. We watch Peter Sellers repeatedly breaking into laughter as he attempts to deliver a piece of dialogue, a speech which itself was finally excised from the film.

There is no escaping this final irony from writer Jerzy Kosinski and director Hal Ashby: Look, they tell the audience, you have just seen a film which seems cohesive, meaningful, structured — and yet it is nothing but an act of illusion, a skillful product. Your perceptions may have no basis in reality, they say, *because you don't know the parts that have been left out!*

What makes this final twist so sharply telling is that it turns the film's thrust right on the very audience that has been laughing — often hilariously — at characters deceived by the self-same illusion.

The central figure of *Being There*, adapted by Kosinski from his own satirical novel, is a middle-aged man, known only as Chance (Sellers), who has spent his entire life working as a gardener for an aged recluse. He has never left the old man's mansion — never. He has never learned to read and never been in a car. Even his sexual organs have never developed.

The only worlds known to Chance are those of his garden, and of television, which he watches with slavish devotion. He is a perpetual child, the ultimate media consumer — retarded, possibly by biology, but essentially by isolation in an artifical world.

When the old man dies, Chance is forced to leave his refuge. Wearing one of his mentor's dapper, 40-year-old suits, he wanders the streets, clutching his anchor, a television remote control.

Then a chance accident throws him into the company of an aged and dying industrial giant (Melvyn Douglas) and his attractive wife (Shirley MacLaine).

It's Chance's very naivete — his lack of emotion or understanding — that enchants the millionaire and his wife. Seller's lack of social graces and conventions make him appear an *honest* man; his inability to converse meaningfully — except on the subject of gardens — gives him the veneer of wisdom and profundity; his childish confusion in reacting to MacLaine's sexual advances comes across as trustworthy and gentlemanly-loving behavior.

As the film evolves, Chance finds himself thrust into the spotlight of American affairs. A meeting with the president promotes him to a national figure; his bemused behavior at an embassy reception finds him mistaken for a man who speaks eight languages, an intellectual giant — all because he can merely nod and smile. Chance has evolved from ultimate media consumer to the ultimate product, and the sophisticated people have become in turn the mindless consumers.

If the essential device of *Being There* seems far-fetched, its handling by writer Kosinski, director Ashby and a superb cast displays such a hard-edged discipline that it becomes plausible and totally compelling — a fit successor to the last fine 'media' film, *Network*. Even through the moments of black comedy, there is a rising sense of involvement and a developing tension, as Chance's accidental (and monumental) fraud grows, that are at times almost excruciating.

If the writing and direction combine a frighteningly literate vision with a polished clarity of style, so does Sellers' performance display a combination of restraint and commitment that is dazzling.

He does not structure his role to an external vision — no effort is spent to make him appear likeable or appealing. With a vacuous smile and meandering gait, this Chance simply *is*, and thus becomes a major creation of the cinema. It is inconceivable that a best-actor Oscar nomination can escape Sellers.

'Gigolo' is a cheap flaw-filled mystery

AMERICAN GIGOLO
Loews, Dorval and Westmount Square

Produced by Jerry Bruckheimer; written and directed by Paul Schrader; photography by John Bailey; with Richard Gere, Lauren Hutton, Hector Elizondo, Nina van Pallandt, Bill Duke and Brian Davies.

RICHARD GERE
Supposedly sensitive

There's a slightly guilty, sadly hypocritical quality to *American Gigolo*. It reminds you of a grown man explaining that he really reads *Playboy* or *Penthouse* for the articles.

If only writer-director Paul Schrader could be honest about his voyeuristic fascination with sleazy sexuality and the American underworld, he might be able to develop honest characters and a solid dramatic vision. The resulting films might not be great art, but they could become solid vicarious fare — and might even display a touch of insight.

Unfortunately, as he demonstrated in last year's *Hardcore*, about a runaway teenager caught up in the world of pornography, Schrader seems compelled to justify his love for the low life with a gloss of insincere social moralizing and vacuous romance. The result adds about as much allure to Schrader's hollow characters and adolescent vision as a Frederick's of Hollywood negligee brings to a streetwalker.

Let me ruefully concede that *American Gigolo* — with Richard Gere portraying a superbly handsome and supposedly sensitive lover-for-hire — may find favor in the eyes of a fair audience segment. It's the stuff that feeds the fantasies of millions of *Cosmopolitan* readers or the fans of Harold Robbins.

There's that sense of peeking into an exotic demi-monde, from Los Angeles' gay bars to Gere's oh-so-tasteful and ritzy singles-village apartment. Add in some oh-so-beautiful people, as Gere ripples his body and former model Lauren Hutton ripples her designer-fashion clothes.

And then there's the dutiful nod to romance and drama, as Hutton risks destroying her marriage if she is to save Gere from a trumped-up sex-murder charge.

For audiences who prefer fantasies woven from durable cloth, however, and not just flimsy chiffon, *American Gigolo* will prove an embarrassment. Schrader's attempts to add depth or soul to his characters are purely external, like dressing up Ken and Barbie dolls, and come undone the minute his people open their mouths.

The very paintings and books so casually strewn in Julian's (Gere's) apartment, the scene which declares him to be a connoisseur of antiques, ring ludicrously false against a posturing character who — when lover Hutton asks him of his past — replies: "I'm from nowhere ... I'm from this bed. You know who I am best when I make love to you."

When Julian defiantly declares that "I don't do fags. I don't do kink," what comes across is neither nobility nor reality, but merely Schrader's guilty fastidiousness, a cheap attempt to elevate a tacky character.

If the characters and dialogue of *American Gigolo* are made of plastic and corn, they are somehow less disappointing than his prostitution of an interesting idea into a rambling and flaw-filled murder mystery. As a male prostitute thrown to the wolves by uncaring pimps and clients, Julian could have been a gripping symbol of our throw-away hedonism, another disposable product in a world of McDonald's sexuality.

Instead, as Julian struggles to avoid using Hutton as an alibi because he *loves* her and doesn't want to destroy her marriage to a senator, Schrader turns him not into a 1980s' *Midnight Cowboy*, but into a dude-ranch punk adrift in the world of *True Detective*.

— *Dave Chenoweth*

Quebecois mystery compelling

CORDELIA
Cinema Dauphin

An NFB production; directed by Jean Beaudin; screenplay by Jean Beaudin and Marcel Sabourin; based on the book La Lampe dans la fenetre by Pauline Cadieux; starring Louise Portal, Gaston Lepage, Raymond Cloutier and Gilbert Sicotte.

This latest Quebecois film by director-writer Jean Beaudin premiered here on Thursday night amid considerable hoopla from the media and invited guests — and all concerned had good reason to celebrate.

Cordelia is up for seven Canadian film awards (formerly called Etrogs, now Genies) including nominations for best actress (Louise Portal), directing, editing, costuming and adaption from another medium.

As in his *J.A. Martin Photographe*, Beaudin has applied his considerable talents to fashioning a film that seems to be a series of delicately-composed, hand-painted Victorian photographs. The film moves with a measured grace — similar to that which paces *Kamouraska* or *Barry Lyndon* — and yet it is never tedious as it tells the story of Cordelia, a woman whose love for life, laughter and music happened to run against the grain of Victorian-Catholic Quebec.

The film (and the book *La lampe dans la fenetre*) develop this abstract premise with a story based on an actual 1897 murder case in which a woman and her lover in a Quebec village were convicted of murdering the woman's husband.

As the book's title suggests, the case actually hinges on whether there was a light in the window of the murdered man's room on the night before the dead body was discovered — but evidence is obviously twisted by a vindictive society determined to pervert justice.

The mood is communicated through the somber colors of dimly-lit faces and claustrophobic rooms — inviting comparison of Beaudin to European film-makers.

Louise Portal richly deserves her award-nomination — and Gaston Lepage is also worthy of considerable praise for his letter-perfect portrayal of the inarticulate co-defendant and country bumpkin Samuel.

— *Bruce Bailey*

Kids eat up Ritter's antics in 'Hero'

HERO AT LARGE
Loews, Fairview, Snowdon

A Stephen Friedman-Kings Road production; directed by Martin Davidson; screenplay by A.J. Carothers; starring John Ritter, Anne Archer and Bert Convy.

By BRUCE BAILEY
of The Gazette

Hero at Large is for anyone whose brain is also at large and not expected back before the last reel of this Hollywood spaghetti has looped through the projector.

Kids, however, seemed to eat up John (*Three's Company*) Ritter's antics at yesterday's sold-out first show at Loew's — where adults were as rare as vitamins in an unfortified breakfast cereal.

The basic premise is that Steve Nichols (Ritter), a struggling young actor, starts to identify with the heroic ideals of Captain Avenger — a TV-film super-hero whom Ritter (and 61 others) happens to be portraying for the purpose of signing autographs to promote a film.

Nichols accidentally intervenes in a grocery store robbery as he is dressed in his Avenger costume, gets hyped-up by the media as he continues his crusade for "justice, loyalty and courage" — and gets naively caught up in an exploitative political campaign (run by a sleazy promo-man played by TV gameshow host Bert Convy).

The film clearly implies that America is in need of heroes — which is not a surprising assertion these days — and the simple-minded line which it draws between good and evil is reminiscent of the do-goodism that got America into the Vietnam War. But there's no denying that the film is cleverly formulated to hop up a young audience simply out for a good time.

Anne Archer does some passable acting here as a love-interest. But Ritter doesn't "act" any differently than he does on his TV sitcom.

Neil Young film indulgent effort

There are a lot of lingering shots in Neil Young's latest paean to himself, *Rust Never Sleeps* (now playing at Cinema Repertoire), but that's what people come to expect from the man considered by many critics to be the best songwriter of the me-decade.

In this carefully-made concert film, Neil's eyes have fire in them at all times and his three sidemen seem to be in a trance while backing up his wails: the film succeeds as the perfect embodiment of adolescent angst.

Young's got the wailing-in-the-moonlight shtick down to a fine art by now. There's none of the fuzzy *cinema verite* style of his previous documentary retrospective, *Journey Through the Past*.

We catch every knowing glance by Neil and cronies in focus, or at least artistically out of focus.

This is *The Last Waltz*, Neil Young style. He's laconic to the point of appearing lazy.

In his songs, when he's not praising the virtues of an obedient lover, he whimpers about being alone in the world, always apart from everyone else.

He projects such a brooding image on the screen that you'd think Young had this film made so he could gaze at himself in his bedroom at night.

— *Juan Rodriguez*

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